Mobilizing Labour for the Global Coffee Market

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regime – sometimes no more than half of the total workforce – actually received payment (De Haan I 1910: 262). The term ‘corvee services’ is even less applicable to the work gangs, also procured in the surroundings of Cirebon by agents of the sugar mills around Batavia to cut and mill the cane produced. Though these seasonal labourers also received a wage for the work they performed, they had no say at all in the terms of their employment.

**Coercion and desertion**

A far heavier burden than these new ways of mobilizing labour was of course the obligation imposed on the peasants to cultivate certain crops, especially and increasingly as time passed, coffee. They were not only forced to grow the coffee, but also to deliver the beans to the VOC’s warehouses and to accept whatever price the Company decided to pay for them – or at least whatever was left of it after the chiefs had deducted their share. Because of the trade monopoly imposed by the VOC, the peasants had no space at all to negotiate. By disallowing outsiders, and the Chinese in particular, access to the region, the Company usurped the market entirely (De Haan I 1910: 390). Forest patrols went around to enforce the ban and violators were arrested and, if they were lucky, kept in detention in chains (De Haan I 1910: 105). The region was almost hermetically sealed off. The closure of the Sunda lands was the consequence of a colonial policy initiated in the eighteenth century.

The VOC considered itself not only as the ruler but also as the owner of the land and its people and conducted business accordingly. But the levying of tribute should not be seen as holding on to old customs. The increased scale and intensity of the burden imposed on the peasants was not the only difference between the new and old regimes. They were now coerced to practise sedentary agriculture to enable the extensive cultivation of the crop that increasingly monopolized the VOC’s attention. In De Haan’s words: ‘It was the cultivation of coffee that sealed the fate of nomadic peasants and forced them to live in permanent settlements’ (De Haan I 1910: 16). The mandate entrusted to the native chiefs meant that they made peasants’ access to land to cultivate food dependent on their willingness to fulfil the colonial obligations to grow and supply prescribed crops. Conversely, as Van Imhoff noted in a report of his journey through the Priangan in 1744, the laying out of the coffee gardens also helped to turn the nomadic rice growers into sedentary cultivators. Sundanese peasants were willing
to grow coffee, but only if they had enough sawahs to do so (De Haan I 1910: 371). The peasants were not only required to plant the coffee and deliver the dried beans to the designated collecting stations, but also to build warehouses, lay roads and perform all other kinds of labour on the VOC’s orders. What was later referred to as cultivation services comprised both growing and delivering specified crops. On top of these came corvee services for their own chiefs, most important of which were relinquishing a share of their own rice harvest and tilling the lord’s own fields, but they also included a wide variety of services in and around the patron’s house. Lastly, the regents were also entitled to collect all kinds of taxes, including tolls, pasar fees, pass duties, a tax on slaughtering cattle or on marriages, etc., without having to account for them in any way at all. After all, such forms of income were part and parcel of what stubbornly came to be defined as ‘self-government’.

Altogether, this meant that the peasants were burdened with a much heavier package of taxes and obligations than under the ancien régime. The difference in quantity was reflected in the quality. This change was related to the weakening of the peasants’ bargaining power, already referred to above. The protest that this invoked did not receive much attention in colonial accounts and must be derived from indirect indications, such as the resistance that the Company experienced when collecting the tribute. As we have seen above, by the end of the eighteenth century, the volume of coffee supplied had expanded steadily. However, this increase did not occur gradually and in a controlled manner, but was subject to strong fluctuations. The periodic adjustments to the quotas imposed on the growers were less an indication of the VOC gaining a tighter grip on the production process than a response to the continually rising demand for coffee in faraway markets, where more people were now also developing a taste for this exotic new drink from afar. Management at arm’s length may have been suitable in the early days of international trade, which focused on a limited volume of high-quality products, but proved to hamper the mobilization of mass quantities, even when supply had to be backed up by coercion. In practice, the VOC was unable to ensure that its orders were carried out adequately. Its incomplete control over the peasants, mediated by native chiefs, is reflected in the extremely volatile nature of coffee supplies between 1721 and 1800. The production records for this period, based on figures collected by De Haan (III 1912: 920-2), show that it was not until the latter years of the eighteenth century that a certain degree of stability emerged and the wildest fluctuations became a thing of the past (see Table 2.1).
The Company directors in Batavia must have been anxious each year to see whether the harvest had increased, perhaps doubled or even more, or would perhaps be half or even less than the year before. Attributing this uncertainty solely to a lack of insight among the managers on the workfloor, while ignoring the very real resistance of the peasants, does not paint the whole picture. Opposition to the command economy took many forms, one of the most notable of which was land flight. Already at the start of the eighteenth century, hundreds of peasant families deserted to the inaccessible mountains in the south of the region, leaving dozens of abandoned settlements to the north. Many fled the highlands and hinterland of Cirebon in other directions and moved either to the nebulous zone around Batavia or found their way to Banten. At one point the population of the regency of Sumedang had declined by a third. Migration was a long-standing problem and early reports contain complaints about it, but the information reached
the VOC too little and too late. During his tour through the Priangan in 1744, Van Imhoff linked land flight to the excessive demands that chiefs imposed on their subjects. Elsewhere in his report he noted that many people fled to Banten because their burden of taxation was less excessive there. The same applied to flight from the lands under the Company’s control to the principalities of Central Java. Sometimes, the cultivation of coffee or some other crop was introduced in an area where the poor soil offered few favourable prospects of a good harvest, simply to stop peasants from fleeing there from other regions that were already subject to forced cultivation.

Reports from the early eighteenth century and later show clearly that much of the peasant migration was motivated by attempts to escape the new regime of compulsory delivery of goods and services. The VOC did its utmost to limit the exodus. As described in the previous chapter, Jacobus Couper informed the regents as early as 1684 that they were not permitted to subordinate people or villages that were under the jurisdiction of other regencies. In 1693, the Company’s agent in Tanjungpura ordered that anyone moving from one district to another should be sent back, an instruction that was extended to cover all the Priangan Regencies in 1697 (De Haan III 1912: 431-2). This instruction was reissued regularly in the following century, no longer purely to put a stop to the inconvenient tendency of peasants to defect to another lord but, by demanding unconditional and exclusive servitude to the regent in whose jurisdiction they lived, to ensure that they could not escape the system of forced cultivation. An order was introduced in 1728 to secure the continued cultivation of coffee and other crops by making desertion a criminal offence. Deserters were to be apprehended and returned to their masters, while chiefs who gave them refuge were also to be punished. Defaulting chiefs were dismissed on the spot, sent to the Resident in chains and exiled overseas to a location specified by the Governor-General and the VOC’s High Command in Batavia (Hoadley 1994: 147). Sometimes a regent would submit a request allowing peasants arriving from elsewhere to stay and help grow the coffee (De Haan III 1912: 173). Such cases were often settled on an ad hoc basis, showing a clear conflict of interests between the place of origin and that of arrival. A resolution in 1778 accused regents and chiefs of transgressing the Company’s orders. In their eagerness to give sanctuary to deserters and nomadic peasants, they caused great harm to the cultivation and delivery of the crops. The punishment for encouraging peasants to defect remained the same as half a century earlier. Deserters themselves were called to order by a form of corporal punishment referred to as ‘a good whipping’ (De Haan I 1910: 417). Recidivists were put in chains in their district of origin for six months.
The VOC refused to acknowledge that desertion and defection were a consequence of the system of forced cultivation. They attributed it to the footloose character of the Priangan peasants, who would up and leave, even abandoning their wife and children, at the slightest provocation. Perhaps they did not like maltreatment by their chief or had other objections that were evidence of their lack of discipline and unwillingness to lead a more regulated and settled life. Land flight, absconding to the mountainous upland beyond the reach of claims from higher up, is how Scott has characterized the footloose life and preference for swidden agriculture segments of the peasantry in Southeast Asia resorted to in their counter-strategy to avoid being governed and taxed in subaltern regimes of dependency (Scott 2009). The Company’s complaints of such ‘vagrancy’ continued until well into the next century, showing that the policy of immobilization did not produce the expected results, despite the rigorous sanctions imposed on malefactors. The fiasco can partly be explained by the inaccessibility of the region, together with the Company’s limited reach of control. In this light, it can be concluded that Mossel’s estimate in 1754 that the Priangan lands had 31,479 inhabitants (Bijvoegsel beschrijving Soendasche eilanden 1781: 272, note c) is little more than a shot in the dark. Knowledge of the hinterland, as well as of the nature and size of its population, remained very superficial. The early expeditions sent out to learn more about these remote regions included land surveyors and map-makers but, notwithstanding all these efforts, such attempts initially had little success. Despite its strong words and sometimes equally strict sanctions, the Company remained floundering in a society that was inscrutable and offered its members a wide range of options for escape and evasion. The only way the VOC could gain control over peasant labour and deploy it for the forced delivery of goods and services, especially coffee, was to rely on the loyal collusion of the native chiefs. The following section examines to what extent this was a realistic proposition.

Indigenous management

The VOC employed the local chiefs as contractors doing the bidding of their Dutch superiors. They were held accountable for implementing the system of compulsory delivery of goods and services. The Company’s officials had no direct contact with the peasants and were not interested in how the chiefs carried out the orders they received and handled the problems they encountered. It would nevertheless be incorrect to see this governance at